

A WATERSHED Moment...

McCoy Wash

United States
Department
of Agriculture

Natural Resources
Conservation
Service

First proposed nearly 20 years ago, the McCoy Wash Watershed Project is now getting underway. The project will protect nearly 10,000 acres in the lower watershed, including about 7,400 acres of farmland. The town of Blythe and surrounding communities will indirectly benefit from the project as well. Congressman Sonny Bono was particularly instrumental in making the proposed project a reality, pushing it through the proper Congressional channels and pressing for timely completion of construction.



The McCoy Wash watershed is located in southeastern Riverside County, just west of Blythe near the California-Arizona border. McCoy Wash and its tributaries drain 171 square miles of undeveloped desert land above the Colorado River floodplain. The upper watershed is predominantly Federal land, managed by the Bureau of Land Management. The agriculturally diverse floodplain is cropped year round, and all of the cropland is prime farmland. Crops in the watershed range from citrus trees to lettuce and other specialty crops, with alfalfa, cotton, lettuce, wheat, and melons as the major crops.



Flooding along McCoy Wash in September, 1996, caused when 1.5 inches of rain fell in nearby mountains during a 24-hour period. Damage from such floods can be more than \$1 million.

The Problem

Floods occur frequently in the 103,000 acre watershed, and many areas in the lower watershed are very susceptible to flood damage. Summer storms can dump one to three inches of rain on the upper watershed within a six to 24-hour time period. Occasionally, large floods occur when tropical storms move into Southern California from Mexico. One such flood in 1939 inundated 10,000 acres in the valley. A more recent flood in 1976 damaged 1,846 acres of farmland and many homes. Total damage from that flood was nearly \$1 million (1976 dollars).

The Solution

A long-awaited flood control project, proposed two decades ago and finally authorized by Congress in 1995, will greatly alleviate flooding problems in the watershed. The five-year project will receive about \$5 million as part of a joint venture between NRCS, the Palo Verde Resource Conservation District, and the McCoy Wash Flood Control District. The plan calls for the construction of a dam and bypass channels to contain flows from McCoy wash.

Work will be completed in three stages. Stage one, construction of the outlet channel, began on December 2. The official groundbreaking ceremony will be held in January, and Congressman Bono has been invited to attend. Stage one should take about 75 days to complete. Stage two, constructing a channel to the wash, should begin in the fall of 1997. Stage three, construction of the main dam, will take two or three years.